TIMES PAST

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Conspiracy suspicions in King case

From Ian McDonald
Washington, June 4

It is more than two years since James Earl Ray was sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder of Dr Martin Luther King, but the debate over the assassination continues unabated.

Controversy has arisen mainly over the trial itself. In Memphis on March 10, 1969, a deal was reached by the judge, the prosecutor and defence counsel under which Mr Ray pleaded guilty in return for being spared the death penalty. The whole proceeding took three and a half hours.

The defendant's brief attempt to speak out and declare that he had been part of a conspiracy was swiftly suppressed.

A survey made soon after the trial found that two-thirds of those questioned believed there had been a conspiracy in the assassination.

The subject has now been taken up by Mr Harold Weisberg, one of that small but impassioned group of authorities on recent American political assassinations. His recently published book *Frame-up*, is a detailed analysis of the whole process of Mr Ray's arrest and trial.

Mr Weisberg has no doubt where the villains are: from beginning to end, in his view, Mr Ray was ill-served by government investigators, the police, lawyers and everyone else associated with the case.

Even Mr Ray's arrest at London airport on June 8, 1968, is surrounded by ambiguities. Scotland Yard reported that he arrived at the airport at about 6.15 in the morning on a flight from Lisbon. While waiting to fly on to Brussels he took the unusual step of wandering into the immigration section for passengers entering Britain, where he was recognized and detained.

On the same day, however, a man using the alias of Ramon George Sneyd was staying at the Pax Hotel in Earls Court. He left about 9.15 that morning to catch a flight to Brussels. Scotland Yard continued to insist that the man it arrested had arrived on the Lisbon flight. If this was so, what happened to the man who was staying at the Pax Hotel?

There is remarkably little evidence to connect Mr Ray with the shot that killed Dr King. The bullet exploded on impact and could no longer be traced to the rifle.

The prosecution alleged that the assassin fired from a bathtub in the boarding house in which the suspect was staying, but he would have had to be a contortionist to do so and at best would have had only a fleeting glimpse of his target on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel.

The police alleged that Mr Ray left the boarding-house after the shooting and then dropped a bundle containing the rifle, his easily-traced prison radio and a few other possessions in the doorway of a cafe near by. Such an inexplicable action immediately raises suspicions of a plot in which someone is acting as a decoy.